



THAT CRITTER'S

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GOT TO GO

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Professional nuisance trappers come to the rescue when wildlife gets a little too up close and personal. BY JOHN FRALEY

Montanans love wildlife. But it's one thing to marvel at a mountain goat in Glacier National Park or watch a mule deer trotting across the prairie. It's another to have a striped skunk camping in your kitchen or a big brown bat fluttering across the bedroom.

When conflicts arise between people and wildlife, many homeowners want the animal removed at once. Local Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks staff can provide advice and information but, with the exception of mountain lions and other potentially dangerous wildlife, not wildlife removal services. That's where professional wildlife control operators, or nuisance trappers, come in.

Nuisance wildlife removal is becoming a growth industry. As more and more people build homes in the countryside, now called the rural-urban interface, problems with beavers and other wildlife continue to grow. Each year, FWP offices across Montana re-

ceive increasing numbers of calls from people reporting animals damaging property, hiding under foundations, or sneaking into houses.

Beavers in particular are a growing problem. Numbers have skyrocketed in many areas because low fur prices provide little incentive for recreational trapping. The problem has been amplified in states such as Massachusetts, Washington, and Colorado that have banned the use of steel traps for beavers. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Federal Wildlife Services now conducts beaver damage management programs in more than 14 states. The agency says that for every \$1 spent in managing beavers, \$6.30 is saved by preventing damage to roads, bridges, dikes and dams, sewers, water treatment facilities, and landscapes.

Beavers are especially hard on trees, which they topple and chew up for food and dam construction. In most cases, tree damage can be considered simply a natural and tolerable occurrence, but sometimes beaver removal is

required. For example, in 2005 growing numbers of the industrious rodents toppled century-old cottonwoods along the Flathead River at Old Steel Bridge Fishing Access Site, a few miles east of Kalispell. The extensive root systems of larger trees prevent riverbanks from eroding in high water, and the loss of cottonwoods could have caused severe erosion. The downed trees at the fishing access site also clogged trails and made parts of the area look like it had been hit by a hurricane. FWP staff tried wrapping fencing materials around tree trunks, but the beavers chewed through the wire or climbed the fence and just chewed higher.

Department officials finally resorted to calling Dave Wallace, owner of a wildlife removal business in Kalispell. "It was a ticklish little job," Wallace says. "It taxes your gray matter thinking about how you're going to get those guys out of there without an incident." Trapping and removing beavers is easy when using regular traps and in areas with no

people or pets, explains Wallace. But the fishing access site is a popular place for dog walking and is crisscrossed with hiking trails. Wallace, state director for the National Wildlife Control Operators Association (NWCOA), decided the safest option would be to use nonlethal snares. He set them on beaver runs far from human trails, using methods that prevent dogs from getting snared. Knowing that a trapped beaver could be dangerous to passersby, Wallace posted warning signs. He also checked the traps before dawn each day to remove any beavers caught the night before. After snaring and then killing the problem beavers, he skinned the animals and sent the pelts to fur auctions in Canada. Wallace dropped the carcasses off at the FWP office to be used for luring bears to culvert traps. Nothing was wasted, he says.

Bats, snakes, and skunks

The nature of a wildlife nuisance problem often differs from one area to another. Dave

Salys, who runs a wildlife control operation in Billings, says that bats, skunks, and snakes are the top three animals he is hired to remove. "Bats are especially hard, because I'm usually dealing with tall ladders and a job that's at least two stories off the ground,"

Salys often has to touch snakes, however. The reptiles can't be shot when inside buildings, so he must remove them by hand—an action that unnerves some clients. "I get people who won't even look at pictures of snakes so we can identify the species," he

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he says. To remove bats, Salys usually installs a one-way door that allows the animals to leave the house on their own but makes it impossible to re-enter. "If you can solve the problem without touching the animal, so much the better," he says.

Salys has removed garter snakes, bull snakes, green racers, and rattlesnakes from basements, crawl spaces, houses, and yards.

Skunks can be the biggest challenge. When these malodorous mammals set up residence in a garage, foundation, basement,

or home, wildlife control operators have to be extra careful not to trigger a spray when they attempt removal. A few years ago, a distraught woman called Wallace at 4 a.m. It turns out she hadn't completely shut the front door when she went to bed, and a large skunk had pushed it open and entered the house. After hearing a strange noise, she entered the kitchen and saw the skunk eating the contents of a garbage can it had tipped over. She ran to the bedroom and called Wallace. When he arrived, he noticed the house was fitted with brand-new furnishings and elaborate carpet and drapery. "I don't know what it is about skunk smell, but once it gets into a fabric you

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just don't get rid of it," says Wallace. "The last thing you want to do is cause the animal to unload in a situation like that. This is just one more reason that I carry lots of liability insurance."

Wallace took his time with the skunk. He says that most homeowners want him to get rid of the animal immediately, but he has learned that some animals can't be rushed. An expert on skunk behavior, Wallace was able to slowly work the animal into an enclosure, all the while making sure it kept its tail down. "If you make a mistake with a

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skunk, you'll know it and everybody in the county will know it," he says.

Wallace has also successfully removed skunks using box traps and chemicals that immobilize the animals. "I just get right down on my belly and work with them," he says. Once, Wallace was called in on a job where a skunk had entered a house through the cat door and was curled up under the television set in the living room. He carefully sneaked up to the skunk and removed it without incident, using what he calls his "tickling" technique. "When that works right I can lead them like a puppy on a leash," he says. When asked how the technique works, Wallace replies, "Trade secret."

After capture, Wallace humanely kills the animal then removes the skunk essence from the gland with a hypodermic needle and ships it to a buyer, usually receiving about \$10 an ounce. A minute amount of this vile-smelling fluid is used as a "booster" in many colognes and perfumes, as well as to produce liquid animal-trapping lures. Wallace also tans and sells the skunk pelt.

The list of wildlife species that cause nuisance problems is a long one. Badgers, ground squirrels, and pocket gophers dig holes in pastures and yards. Woodpeckers knock holes in siding. Coyotes enter subdivisions and kill cats and dogs. Raccoons can be dangerous to pets and even humans, especially when the animals become habituated to scavenging garbage, dog food, birdseed, and other edibles left outdoors.

Depending on the species and the situation, Wallace may remove the attractants, cover holes that allow entrance into buildings, or remove the animal by trapping, immobilization (using a tranquilizer in a syringe affixed to the end of a "poke-pole"), or, in rare cases, shooting. When an animal is trapped alive, it is usually killed using lethal injection, drowning, or a carbon dioxide chamber. Most animals are not released elsewhere, because that would likely move the problem to a new location. However, says Wallace, when clients request that an animal be relocated, he tries to comply. After one woman hired him to catch and kill a skunk that was in her house, she held a prayer vigil for the deceased animal.

Wildlife control specialists say their busi-

ness requires them to understand the public's widely divergent attitudes toward wildlife—and trapping. "I've encountered everything from complete acceptance of my role as a trapper to 'you shouldn't be allowed on the planet,'" says Phil Hettinger, who runs a wildlife control business in the Bozeman area. Some people oppose trapping in principle, even if it is necessary to remove an animal causing a serious problem. But Hettinger, a regional NWCOA director, says that often a little information can soften people's attitudes toward trapping. "Sometimes I get calls from people who really don't want the problem animal killed," he says. "I explain to them that I do lethal control quickly and efficiently, and tell them why. When they think about it, they usually end up wanting whatever it will take for it not to be their problem anymore."

Animal removal specialists point out that people need to take some responsibility for how their actions may invite nuisance wildlife problems. "When you build right on top of an area where animals once roamed freely, you are creating your own conflicts," Wallace says. Hettinger adds that new homes often provide artificial habitat for raccoons, skunks, bats, coyotes, pigeons, marmots, and other wildlife, creating increased opportunities for conflict. "It's not the animal's fault that it finds the new habitats inviting," he says.

Wildlife control is a sorely needed service, but it is not a business for the faint of heart. Removal specialists often deal with distraught homeowners who are angry, scared, or both. And wild critters can be stubborn, unpredictable, and often dangerous. Wallace has been bitten by muskrats and foxes, charged and scratched, and even sprayed in the mouth by a skunk not about to be "tickled" into submission. "I stay current on my tetanus and rabies vaccinations," he says. 🐾

For more information on dealing with nuisance wildlife, visit the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov and look under "Wild Things" and then "Living with Wildlife." The department has produced guides for 21 different species of game and nongame animals. Check the yellow pages for professional trappers in your region.



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CRITTER RIDDERS Clockwise from top: Dave Wallace of Kalispell sets an underwater beaver trap; bats in an attic roof; a raccoon caught in a live trap; a chimney cap installed to prevent bats and birds from entering. "If you can solve the problem without touching the animal, so much the better," says one wildlife removal specialist.



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